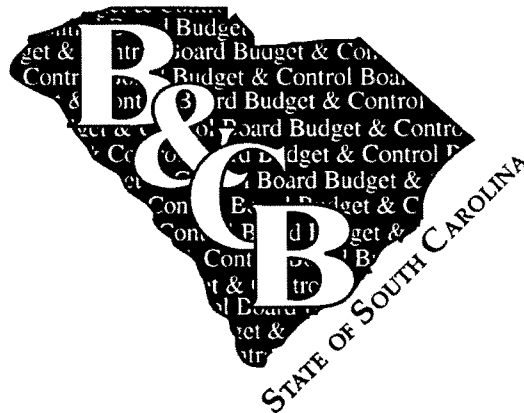


May 19, 2003

State Government News Summary



**Prepared by the Budget and Control Board
Office of the Executive Director**




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Senate in budget quandary

Posted Monday, May 19, 2003 - 1:52 am

By James T. Hammond and Tim Smith
STAFF WRITERS
COLUMBIA — It's gridlock in the Senate.

Senators return today for more deliberations on how much state government can spend next year.

They are slowly coming to grips with the prospect of producing a smaller budget than that passed by the House.

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In a General Assembly where the Senate has traditionally prided itself on "fixing" what they think a parsimonious House has left out, spending less would be quite an event.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence, said he remains committed to trying to raise additional money for education, which the House funded at \$1,643, the lowest per-pupil level in a decade. Democratic senators want to increase that to the Education Finance Act recommendation of \$2,201. Leatherman has tried, but so far failed, to get the figure above \$1,900.

Leatherman cautioned that because of revenue measures already stripped out of the House plan on the Senate floor, including a \$25 surcharge on all traffic fines, the Senate will resume debate today \$67 million in the red.

Failing agreement on some new revenue-raising measure, Leatherman said, "We'll have to cut."

Because of that shortfall and the reluctance to raise taxes, Sen. Gerald Malloy, D-Hartsville, said the House version of the budget could end up with more money for education than a Senate plan.

So far, efforts by Senate leaders on both sides of the aisle to increase the cigarette tax by 53 cents per pack for health care, and increase the sales tax by as much as 2 cents on the dollar, have failed. But those debates are not over, and advocates of raising more taxes said they'll try again when they resume debate today.

Bruce Ransom, chair of policy studies at Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute, said some voters are becoming uneasy about the erosion of public services, while at the same time resisting tax-rate increases.

ù "The majority may not yet be there, but more bipartisan voices are looking at tax enhancement strategies. Those lawmakers who are speaking out are hearing the footsteps of the citizens. There isn't a huge outcry yet, but the rumblings are there," Ransom said.

Sen. Tommy Moore, D-Clearwater, said if there's no consensus on new revenue, "we'll be into the hard decisions of who will get the cuts."

Moore wants to raise the sales tax 2 cents on the dollar, exempt the first \$15,000 of individual income from taxes, and create a dividend tax break for small business owners. It would also provide additional funds for agencies such as prisons, police, public health and education. But so far he has failed to win majority support for the \$1.1 billion proposal.

Sen. David Thomas, R-Fountain Inn, is promoting an alternative plan that would raise the sales tax 2 cents, but devote most of the new revenue to wiping out property taxes on owner-occupied homes and personal vehicles.

Education and health care are not the only government services threatened by two consecutive years of shrinking spending. General-fund appropriations peaked in 2001-2002 at \$5.55 billion, fell to \$5.44 billion this year, and the General Assembly is currently planning to spend \$5.1 billion next year.

The vise squeezing state agencies is a combination of a struggling economy and the tendency of the Legislature to start new programs with one-time revenue.

For several years they got away with the practice because economic growth allowed them to continue the new programs. But when the economy stagnated, lawmakers were forced to curb spending or increase tax rates.

Sen. Scott Richardson, R-Beaufort, proposed a 1-cent sales tax for one year only to bridge the economic chasm the state finds itself in this year.

Richardson described the Corrections Department as "a prison riot looking for a place to happen," because of the layoff of hundreds of corrections officers.

If funded at the House-approved levels or lower, the budget could have serious consequences for the state's prison agencies.

The Department of Corrections already is running a \$28 million deficit and has slashed education and other nonessential services as a result. Some lawmakers, including Richardson, believe the giant prison system, whose inmate population has grown in recent years, may be vulnerable to another class-action federal lawsuit and federal court control.

At the Department of Juvenile Justice, which has been under federal court monitoring since 1996, director William Byars hoped that money included in the Senate Finance Committee proposal would finally allow the agency to end its 13-year-old federal lawsuit and improve conditions. The committee recommended adding \$7 million, needed to help operate DJJ's Coastal Evaluation Center and to hire more correctional officers on second shift, when much of the violence occurs in long-term facilities.

But those and other additions could be cut.

"The Department of Public Safety can't keep the Highway Patrol on the roads. And I don't want to read another story about mental health patients being chained to a fence," Richardson said.

Richardson's 1-cent plan failed to win support. Opposition to any new taxes remains strong in the Senate.

Sen. Larry Martin, R-Pickens, said last week he recognizes the needs that will go unmet without a sales tax increase. But he probably would not support such an increase "because I have a \$300 million hole in my county's economy," he said, referring to the bankruptcy of Carolina Investors and HomeGold Inc.

Martin has supported the increase in the cigarette tax, because he said raising \$171 million to produce \$500 million in health care services with the federal match is irresistible mathematics.

But Senate President Pro Tem Glenn McConnell, R-Charleston, urged the Senate to reject the cigarette tax, which he described as "punitive."

"You cannot tax your way into prosperity," McConnell said.



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Posted on Mon, May. 19, 2003

S.C. could get additional federal judge if bill passes

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. - Federal judges in South Carolina say they need more help to handle a high caseload, and the judges could get it under a bill that has been approved by a U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee.

U.S. District Court Judge Cameron Currie of Columbia says she has heard cases every weekday without a break since Feb. 27 - including skipping a lunch break. "We could certainly use the help," she said.

Of the 94 federal district courts in the nation, South Carolina ranked 18th in terms of its caseload. South Carolina also had the highest caseload among the 4th Circuit, which includes the district courts of South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and West Virginia.

During a year that ended Sept. 30, 2002, each South Carolina district judge had on average 499 cases pending. The national average was 471 cases pending.

"We certainly can use another one," said South Carolina's Chief U.S. District Judge Joe Anderson. "It's not just a political plum" that U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham wants to create, Anderson said. "We qualify for another one based on our judges' caseload."

Graham, R-S.C., tried to add state seats to the U.S. district court as a congressman but failed. He amended this bill, approved by the committee last week, to include South Carolina.

"We desperately need another judge," Graham said. "It's the caseload. And we've got judges about to retire."

Of South Carolina's district court judges, two are close to retirement and hear a reduced caseload. Judge Matthew Perry of Columbia handles 50 percent of the typical caseload and Judge Sol Blatt Jr. of Charleston handles 30 percent.

South Carolina currently has 11 federal judges, but Circuit Court Judge Henry Floyd has been nominated for the seat vacated by U.S. District Judge Dennis Shedd, who was been promoted to the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va.

U.S. district court judges are nominated by the president and handle criminal and civil federal cases. They sit below federal appeals court judges and are appointed for life.

Anderson hopes it will be easier to add judges this year because same political party controls the White House and Congress.

When there's a split, he said, Congress can be reluctant to add judgeships that will be filled by the president's nominees.

Another amendment to the bill would add 36 bankruptcy judges across the nation including one in South Carolina, which now has two. Bankruptcies have risen to all-time highs. They increased 7.1 percent nationally for the year ending March 31, and 5.4 percent in South Carolina.

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Lawmakers eliminating teachers' jobs

Posted Monday, May 19, 2003 - 2:28 am

Cuts in teaching positions will have negative consequences in South Carolina for years to come.

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There's little doubt that the General Assembly's budget cuts will hurt public education in South Carolina. With state lawmakers gutting basic education funding, school districts have little choice but to cut teaching positions, expand class size and cut some courses. The result will be a narrower curriculum and less time for teachers to grade assignments, communicate with parents and work with students on an individual basis.

The Greenville County school district will have to cut an estimated 290 teachers to bridge a \$28 million budget shortfall next year. That comes on top of an already announced cut to the district office and the elimination of seven assistant superintendents and other staff to save \$7.3 million.

Average Greenville County classrooms will increase by three students, but that number is deceptive because some classrooms — such as special education classrooms — have mandated limits. The increase for the average classroom is likely to be much higher. That, in turn, is certain to impede the educational process.

The final numbers are uncertain as House and Senate lawmakers continue to battle over the budget. Most school districts rightfully are basing their budgets on the most conservative estimates of what will emerge from Columbia. The House has set the state per-pupil spending at \$1,643, which takes public education back to funding levels of 1994. Based on that estimate, schools across the state have eliminated 1,500 teaching positions, and as many as 6,000 positions eventually may be eliminated.

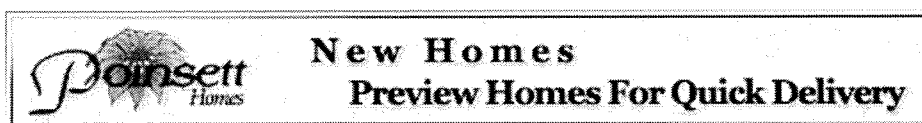
There is some hope that Senate lawmakers will raise the per-pupil spending level, which should be \$2,201 according to the Education Finance Act. But Senate leaders said the final result should not be far above the House's numbers. State Education Superintendent Inez Tenenbaum has urged the Legislature to commit to full education funding, while Gov. Sanford has emphasized reform rather than full funding.

Hardest hit by the budget cuts will be the state's poorer, rural districts. Those districts, with their lower salaries and far from ideal situations, already are unable to recruit and retain the best teachers. Those districts also are unable to raise property taxes to make up for state budget cuts because they have very limited taxable wealth.

Many school districts will increase property taxes to help close yawning budget gaps, and thus state lawmakers will have succeeded in making school boards the fall guys for the Legislature's abdication of responsibility.

Districts that raise taxes most likely will still have to cut staff because the Legislature is

taking such a huge bite out of basic education funding. State lawmakers should understand that their actions will have negative consequences for education for years to come.



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Lee takes jokes, rap to task

Filmmaker says civil rights leaders deserve respect

Associated Press

COLUMBIA--Filmmaker Spike Lee extolled the virtues of a college education and said some things are too sacred to laugh about.

Speaking Saturday at the Black Expo here, Lee said that jokes in the film "Barbershop" about civil rights leaders were over the top.

"I cannot laugh at a joke about Rosa Parks," he said to scattered applause. "I'm sorry, but that's not funny."

Parks made history in December 1955 when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Ala., city bus.

Her arrest triggered a 381-day boycott of the bus system by blacks and led to court rulings desegregating public transportation nationwide.

Lee also told black parents in the audience to steer their children toward real role models and away from rappers.

He said violent images from rappers such as 50 Cent are damaging the next generation.

"Forget about the beat," he said. "Let's talk about the lyrical content."

Lee, a graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta, said education was the path to success. He lamented that young black scholars sometimes are ridiculed as fakes who are "acting white."

"But if you're on a corner, holding a 40, smoking a blunt and holding your privates, then you're real."

He also urged his audience to boycott any business that displays the Confederate flag.

The flag flies at a Civil War monument on Statehouse grounds in Columbia. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is continuing a boycott of the state until the flag is removed.

"The rest of the world is in 2003," Lee said. "I don't know what's happening in South Carolina."

The Rev. Willie Sims, who attended the expo, said that while he agreed with many of Lee's points, many blacks in South Carolina have concerns that outrank the Confederate flag.

"I don't have a problem with the flag," Sims said. "What makes people prejudiced is what's in their hearts."

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MUSC noted for increase in its research funding

GRAPEVINE

The Medical University of South Carolina has risen significantly among medical schools in terms of research funding received, according to a new report from the National Institutes of Health.

In the past five fiscal years, MUSC's College of Medicine climbed 15 rungs, from 64th among 125 medical schools to 49th in terms of NIH funding, the main source of research funding that MUSC receives.

NIH grants increased by 168 percent to \$67.3 million for College of Medicine departments.

MUSC received \$131.1 million in total research awards for fiscal 2002 including research support from the state, corporations and foundations and NIH awards to other MUSC colleges.

Four MUSC departments ranked in the top 20 nationally for research funds. They include otolaryngology, 11th nationally and first in the Southeast with \$2.3 million, ophthalmology 15th nationally and third in the Southeast with \$3.4 million, anatomy and cell biology 16th nationally and fifth in the Southeast with \$8 million and psychiatry 19th nationally and fifth in the Southeast with \$11.7 million.

In addition, MUSC is listed among the top 100 institutions in the country in terms of federal research and development funds received in 2000 and 2001, the Chronicle of Higher Education reports in its most recent edition.

MUSC ranked 96th with more than \$60.5 million in 2001, up 46 percent from the previous year. Johns Hopkins came in first. In the Southeast the top schools were Chapel Hill 22nd, Duke 23rd, Emory 30th and Vanderbilt 40th.

Nationwide institutions received more than \$19 billion in 2001, up 9 percent from the previous year.

This year could turn out even better. MUSC is easily on its way to topping last year's research. Dr. John Raymond, the university's provost, believes the institution could top \$150 million in total research when the fiscal year ends in June.

TOP REAL ESTATE

Local biotech company Pilot Therapeutics has its first product, an over-the-

counter asthma treatment called Airozin, in 55 retail outlets throughout the Charleston area as part of its test-marketing efforts.

But it's "where" Airozin is located within these outlets that may be most important.

Ski Chilton, Pilot's founder, boasted at the company's annual meeting last week about Airozin's "real estate." At various outlets, the product can be found next to Claritin, Primatene Mist, Benadryl and Breathe Right strips, all well-known medicines designed to make people breath better in one form or another.

"We're very excited to be in this real estate," Chilton said.

HAPPY DAYS ARE (ALMOST) HERE AGAIN

At least that's the word from the Travel Industry Association. It looked into its crystal ball and sees good news ahead for the economy.

The association predicts that the U.S. economy will strengthen in the second half of the year, although the pace of recovery is likely to be slower than most would like. Here in summary form is what the association said in its recent newsletter:

-- Real GDP growth is forecasted to come in at 3.7 percent in third quarter and 4.5 percent in the fourth, for a gain of 2.6 percent for the year.

-- With the war over in Iraq and the transition to reconstruction begins, renewed optimism is expected, which would be conducive to both consumer and business spending. This assumes the absence of terrorist attacks here at home.

-- Retail sales surged 2.1 percent in March, posting their strongest showing since the fall of 2001. And, 56 percent of Business Roundtable CEOs think their companies' sales will grow in the next six months. Business spending on equipment appears to be on the recovery track. Real spending on producers' durable equipment is expected to jump 5 percent in 2003 and 11 percent in 2004.

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Posted on Mon, May. 19, 2003

Man convicted in trooper's killing

The Associated Press
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Moncks Corner A jury has convicted a 23-year-old man of killing state Highway Patrol Cpl. Kenneth Jeffrey Johnson in July 2002.

The jury took two hours Saturday to convict Jesse W. Sapp on seven of eight charges, including murder, three counts of possessing drugs with intent to distribute, possession of a controlled substance and unlawful carrying of a pistol. He was found not guilty on a charge of receiving stolen goods.

Sapp faces the death penalty or life in prison.

Sapp, who had a history of drug arrests and who told jurors he didn't remember what happened that night, cried when the verdict was read.

Johnson, a 12-year veteran of the Highway Patrol, is survived by his wife, 13-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter.

Johnson's wife, Melissa Dubay Johnson, wept, as did Sapp's mother when the verdict was read. Johnson's colleagues, friends and family exchanged hugs and handshakes after jurors left the Berkeley County courtroom.

The verdict came after a final appeal from Sapp.

"Before you leave the courtroom, I want you to know that I'm not some kind of monster or a madman," he told jurors during closing arguments. "I don't know what happened that night. I'd just like you to consider the facts."

On Friday, a former Charleston County detention officer testified that Sapp told him, "I know I'm looked at as a monster, but people just don't understand. I was going to be in a lot of trouble. I had a stolen truck, a stolen gun and a lot of drugs, and they were going to send me to jail for a long time."

Prosecutors reminded the nine men and three women of the jury of that confession and other facts during closing statements.

Deputy prosecutor Blair Jennings told jurors that Sapp's fingerprints and blood were found on the gun that witnesses and forensics experts said fired the fatal bullet.

"Every piece of evidence proves one thing and that is that Jesse Sapp is a cold-blooded murderer," Jennings said, listing the drugs, money and a gun Sapp possessed.



Get on with overdue DMV reform

South Carolinians have long heard promises of reforms that would make the state Division of Motor Vehicles a more efficient operation. Many of those repeatedly forced to wait in line for protracted periods at DMV offices have grown understandably wary of such pledges.

But the series of DMV changes announced by Gov. Mark Sanford Thursday, and pending legislation that will continue the reform process, provide tangible encouragement that this time around, the promises will be kept.

As Brian Hicks reported in Friday's Post and Courier, among the improvements announced by Gov. Sanford: DMV will open six of its regional offices on Saturdays during the summer; drivers soon will be able to renew licenses over the Internet; in-office customer transactions will be streamlined by the addition of more greeters who help them get their paperwork in order in advance; in-house labor on information technology and inmate labor for maintenance will reduce costs.

The governor wasn't the only elected official delivering good DMV news Thursday. House Speaker David Wilkins, R-Greenville, and Senate President Pro Tem Glenn McConnell, R-Charleston, joined him in predicting that comprehensive DMV reform legislation will pass before the General Assembly adjourns next month.

A focal point of that bill is the transformation of DMV into a stand-alone agency that reports, through its executive director, directly to the governor. This common-sense move to enhance DMV accountability is overdue.

As Gov. Sanford accurately observed Thursday, "If you're looking for one agency that has historically symbolized everything that doesn't work in state government, it's the DMV."

The General Assembly obviously faces other pressing issues, particularly a budget debate intensified by lean revenues, as this year's legislative session winds down. But prudent DMV reforms, as Gov. Sanford explained Thursday, won't just save time for our state and its residents. Those reforms could save money, too. Gov. Sanford said Thursday that those savings could rise to \$2.5 million in technology and maintenance costs alone.

The Senate should move forward on the DMV reform bill passed by the House. We've waited long enough.

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King rally fails to sway council views

Posted Monday, May 19, 2003 - 1:52 am

By Jason Zacher
STAFF WRITER
jzacher@greenvillenews.com

One day after 10,000 Martin Luther King holiday supporters rallied at County Square, some Greenville County Council members said the holiday must face financial reality.

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Previous coverage
• 8,000 march for holiday

Mark Kingsbury, whose proposal was passed by the council, said the county's new financial outlook shows growing deficits in future years, unless the county makes spending changes. He said it is not the right time to spend more money.

"I would not want to fire five folks to have an extra paid holiday," he said. "We're already going to have to make some hard decisions."

County officials estimated a King holiday will cost \$134,000, but that's an argument the Rev. Jesse Jackson rejects.

"They say they can't afford it, but who are they going to work with that day?" Jackson asked during Saturday's rally. "The city's closed. The school district's closed. The state's closed."

Kingsbury's proposal, which was approved by seven of the 12 council members, designated the third Monday in January as Martin Luther King Day, and leaves it up to a vote of the county employees whether it would be a paid holiday.

Employees will hold an annual vote to choose five holidays the county will observe. One of those holidays is King Day. Another is Confederate Memorial Day.

Several of the seven council members called the proposal a fair compromise. Holiday supporters rejected that claim, sparking Saturday's march and rally.

Jackson led the 8,000-person march with national NAACP President Kweisi Mfume. The marchers met 2,000 more protesters at County Square for a two-hour rally. It was the largest protest in Greenville history.

"I understand they had a pretty good crowd," said Councilman Bob Taylor, one of the seven who voted for Kingsbury's proposal. "I'm not sure what it's supposed to do."

But Greenville might not be the only county facing controversy over the lack of a King

holiday. After the Greenville rally, another group turned its attention to forcing York County to adopt the holiday.

The National Action Network is calling for a once-a-month boycott of York County starting today, where people will be asked not to buy food or gas in York County one Monday a month.

Shelton J. Boyd, executive director of the Charlotte chapter of the network, said today's boycott and a related march is about awareness.

"Imagine where this country would be today if there wasn't a Dr. King," Boyd said.

Greenville, York and Lexington counties are the only three of South Carolina's 46 counties that do not close offices on the third Monday in January for the King holiday.

"I think it was great that we live in a country where if you want to march for the holiday, you can do it," Kingsbury said.

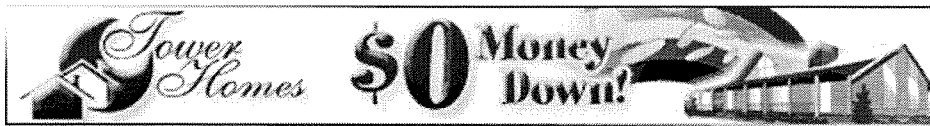
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Job-training bill makes room for religion

Posted Monday, May 19, 2003 - 2:28 am

Faith groups add competition to the mix.

Money from the job training program approved recently by U.S. House lawmakers would be vital for a state such as South Carolina, which is seeing rising unemployment as jobs — especially textile jobs — are being lost by the thousands.

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The \$6.6 billion national program passed the House by a vote of 220 to 204 and earned the support of U.S. Rep. Jim DeMint. The vote was largely along party lines, with Democrats objecting to the money being available for religious groups that provide job services.

Democrats don't want taxpayer funds going to faith groups that can discriminate in employment through their own religious-based hiring practices. But Republicans argued correctly that religious groups often succeed because they hire people who share a commitment to the values of their faith. Dedication to faith often provides a strong motivation to help others in need.

By adding religious groups to the mix, the measure also would provide healthy competition among agencies that provide job services. The bill emphasizes "one-stop career centers" that bring together a variety of employment services such as training and job placement. Careful federal oversight is needed to ensure all participating agencies — religious and nonreligious — successfully help workers secure job skills and employment.

The bill faces strong opposition in the Senate, but lawmakers shouldn't interfere with the ability of religious-based agencies to offer job services so desperately needed in South Carolina and throughout the nation.



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Party primary challenge tests Democrats' strength

BY SCHUYLER KROPF
Of The Post and Courier Staff

Two weeks into his new job, S.C. Democratic Party Chairman Joe Erwin sees a mix of dark clouds and silver linings.

The clouds include the anticipated cost of more than \$2 million to conduct a February presidential primary, and the strong possibility that incumbent U.S. Sen. Fritz Hollings may not run again.

The silver lining is that Democrats can save money by using paper ballots in the party primary and then draft 4,000 unpaid volunteers to run it. In that case, the cost might drop significantly, possibly to \$350,000 or less.

Also, Hollings has given Erwin clearance to explore recruiting someone else to run for the Senate seat. "I have some names in my head, but nothing committed to paper," Erwin said last week, adding, "We can call them when we get some commitment from the senator, either way."

Coming off the high from the party's presidential debate that drew all nine candidates to the state, Erwin inherits a state headquarters operation under less than ideal conditions. The party raised more than \$300,000 during its May 3 debate weekend and the festivities surrounding it. After paying off just a few of its debts, including \$20,000 to rent and put together the debate stage for ABC News at the University of South Carolina, it is left with about \$225,000 in the bank.

That comes as the party headquarters also needs to be re-staffed after two of four key officers, political director Will Drake and finance director Ashlie Bagwell -- recently left to take jobs in other states.

The state party last year scored a publicity coup when the Democratic National Committee eased its calendar rules and allowed South Carolina to hold a first-in-the-South primary that would be the third big vote in the nation, behind Iowa and New Hampshire. The change was made when Democrat Jim Hodges still held the governor's seat and before there was a financial plan to pay for a party primary. Now the realities of responsibility are starting to surface.

Lacking a major influx of cash, Erwin's plan is still to run a 7 a.m.-7 p.m. primary election in all 2,005 precincts statewide, but he hopes that 4,000 Democratic faithful will be interested enough to work the polls on a Tuesday.

"Frankly, it would be easier if we were flush with cash to write the check" and have outside accountability, he said. But he added there "just may be better things to do with the money." Not having to pay trained election staff will save the most cash, he said, but it also could be difficult to organize a primary in counties with low resources and poor party organization.

It wouldn't be the first time that volunteer election workers have been used for a presidential preference primary; the Republicans did it in 2000.

Erwin doesn't think using paper ballots will create any large-scale credibility problems since there is only one issue to be decided, the winner of the primary.

One idea that has surfaced is to get the candidates to pay more of the cost of conducting the primary, but Erwin doesn't plan to ask them since they already have been asked to pony up what could amount to a \$4,000 filing fee to get on the ballot. Charging any additional fee, he said, would be electoral extortion. "I think that would violate the spirit of the primary," he said.

Jay Reiff, former campaign manager for Hodges, said the party needs to do more than hope it can put a primary together. Everyone who has a stake in bringing the Democratic Party back to power has to act, he said.

"To be successful, they will need to reach out and work to recruit new volunteers," said Reiff, now an advisor to Gov. Mike Easley of North Carolina.

"But they'll have a great product to sell," he added. "The presidential primary will generate excitement. They need to tap that excitement. The presidential primary could be a real godsend for the South Carolina Democratic Party."

As far as where to go from here, Kevin Geddings, a former consultant to Hodges, said the party may want to consider a 10-year rebuilding plan because it may take at least that long to become competitive in the state again.

Geographically, the only region of South Carolina where Democrats appear to have a chance to cut into Republican leads is on the coast, he said, pointing specifically to Charleston County.

"Clearly we cannot win statewide and continue to be crushed along the coast," Geddings said. "The coast is where voters at least will consider a Democratic candidate. That's not an option in the western part of the state," around Greenville and Spartanburg, he added. "Those voters are lock-stock Republicans for at least another generation."

Geddings suggested building up the Democratic base steadily, by winning county races here and there. He pointed to moderate areas around Charleston and Myrtle Beach as fertile ground.

Another chance for Democratic gains, Geddings said, is making appeals after budget cuts in state government become a reality in more well-to-do neighborhoods, such as in Mount Pleasant.

"Once these budget cuts are actually implemented, then families in suburbia ... who drop off their kids in grade schools where there's one teacher and 35 kids, that will be our opportunity," he said.

Reiff said Democrats should bide their time and not expect miracles overnight, or even by 2004.

"The last Democratic presidential nominee to win South Carolina was Jimmy Carter in 1976," Reiff said. "Joe Erwin is very talented, but it would be unfair to expect him to turn this trend around in one year.

"The immediate problem is all the wrong lessons are being learned from last year's election," he added. "The Democratic Party's problem is not with black voters. The problem is with white voters. The best way to build a strong party is to recruit strong candidates at the local level."

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